'A Little Bit of Their Own Place'

Belleau Wood and the Marines

by Agostino von Hassell

It is the trees that tell the story. When the last survivor of the battle is dead, the remaining trees will still display their pathetic scars.

Belleau looks, at first glance, like a thousand other small sleepy country towns in the Champagne region of France. There is a little square with a small pond full of goldfish, a pale yellow mailbox, an extremely modern phonebooth, a small bakery which doubles as social center and general store. The houses are solid old farm buildings, built lovingly by earlier generations with the heavy, gray fieldstones of the region. Occasionally a car moves through town, while women in their black headscarves stop and chat with each other as they go about their shopping.

But in what other ordinary village in France would you find the Marine Corps colors proudly displayed behind the mayor's desk, next to the Tricolore. Where else in France do people smile radiantly when they spot the USMC sticker on your car—they stop and chat with you, trying out their few words of English. "Ah, les Marines," they say, "our friends, nos amis." In only a few American towns, would U.S. Marines find so kind a reception as they have been finding in the village of Belleau for the last 65 years. This unusual friendship between U.S. Marines and the people of Belleau was formed in the last summer of the First World War.

When dawn broke on 6 June 1918, pounding artillery and mortar fire, the staccato of heavy machineguns, the flat cracking sounds of Springfield '03 rifles, the howling, the cries of the wounded, the shouts of encouragement broke the country quiet. It was then that American Marines placed themselves firmly into the collective memory of the people of Belleau. These ties are exceptionally strong. They have held firm over six decades, through another World War, much political upheaval, and will, if the Marines and the people of Belleau get their way, last for a long time. For most people, here and in Europe, the First World War is ancient history. Few know the names of individual battles such as the battle of Belleau Wood which "saved Paris" in the words of French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. But for Marines and the people of Belleau the memory is still strong.

Claude Crapart raises Charolet cattle. This type of cattle is one of the most prized in France for its beef. In June of 1981, close to Belleau, one of his cows stepped on an unexploded 75mm artillery round left over from that battle in 1918. The cow died. Claude Crapart also produces wheat, corn, sugar beets, and eggs. He is also the mayor of Belleau and lives on an old farm in the center of town. You still can see traces of machinegun fire and shrapnel on some of the walls.

"I hope," he said some time ago, "that Marines will always find a warm welcome in Belleau, that

our little village will be for them a little bit of their own place, for they came to this country when it was in danger. I think I know my fellow villagers well enough to know that they share this hope with me, particularly the older ones. Those who saw the battlefield with the horrified eyes of a 7-, 10- or 15-year-old child tell us intimately about it."

The mayor of Belleau was speaking to an audience that included virtually all the villagers and some 20 Marines. Among the Marines was Col James L. Cooper, who had presented the mayor with a set of Marine Corps colors and an invitation to visit Washington, D.C.

Marine Corps colonels don't just travel around handing out flags and inviting mayors of small country towns to Washington. Colonels, in relatively short supply, have better things to do, and the Marine Corps is too concerned with saving money to do something of this nature in the first place. However, for Belleau, the Marine Corps will do a lot, including paying the way to Washington for the mayor of this village of 80 souls, honoring him with a parade and showing him around Marine installations.

In May 1918, the German Army embarked on a major offensive to end the war. Superbly led and disciplined, even after 4 years of demoralizing trench warfare, the German troops, poured through an opening in the front and advanced to within 56 miles of Paris. Panic started. Parisians packed their belongings and started to flee. French troops, ordered to make a stand, retreated in disorder. Senior Allied generals and key French politicians seriously considered asking for an immediate armistice. The French Government prepared to flee. The situation was quite desperate. To delay the rapidly advancing Germans, the Allied high command ordered the American 2d Division to make a stand. That division, fresh to the war, included the 4th Brigade, consisting of the 5th and 6th Regiments of Marines and the 6th Machinegun Battalion of Marines.

The Marines moved up to the front. An Army officer described them:

> They looked fine, coming in there, tall fellows, healthy and fit—they looked hard and competent. We watched you going in, through those tired little Frenchmen, and we all felt better. We knew something was going to happen.

The Marines passed disoriented, demoralized, thoroughly beaten and scared French troops. A high-ranking French officer instructed the Marines to move back to safety. Resistance was useless. "Retreat? Hell, we just got here," Marine Capt Lloyd Williams retorted. The French commander in charge of the sector that Marines were to defend told 2d Division commander, BGen J.G. Harbord: "Have your men prepare en-

Life-size portrait of MajGen James G. Harbord, which has been hanging in the main dining room of the Army and Navy Club in Washington, D.C., since 1923, was paid for by contributions from Marine Corps officers who served with him in the 4th Marine Brigade in France. The artist was Richard S. Meryman, a widely known portrait painter at the time.

trenchments some hundreds of yards to rearward." Harbord is reported to have replied: "We dig no trenches to fall back on. The Marines will hold where they stand." Up to that time the two Marine regiments had barely been tested in battle. Most of the men had just arrived in France, after some brief training at Parris Island and Quantico. One could easily dismiss their youthful enthusiasm. But over the next weeks they showed that they meant every word of it.

On 4 June 1918, the 2d Division held some 11 miles of front just some 50 miles east of Paris. Astride the old Paris-Metz highway, the Americans faced crack German regiments. The Marines, just north of the Paris-Metz highway faced the 461st Imperial German Infantry Regiment.

The Germans advanced. From an incredible distance of 800 yards, Marines took the Germans under fire. As their ranks thinned, the Germans retreated and decided to dig in. They made their stand in a wooded area known as the *Bois de Belleau*, a game preserve long favored by the Kings of France and named for a small nearby village. Official German reports from the bat-

tlefield recount the amazement German officers expressed over the marksmanship of Marines. The Springfield '03 rifle, carried by Marines, was not supposed to be accurate for much more than 450 yards. Marines were hitting their targets at 800 yards, an incredible distance. In today's Corps the maximum distance shot for rifle qualifications is 500 yards. But marksmanship has always been a hallmark of Marines.

The Marines, their spirits high after that first success, were ordered to take the wood, expel the some 1,200 Germans. On 6 June they faced a wide, rolling wheatfield, the hilly area of the woods behind the field. Just four feet high, the wheat offered little cover to the charging Marines, facing heavy German machinegun fire. Artillery and mortar supported the Marines. The Germans had their own artillery and mortars.

Three times the Marines charged. Three times they fell back. It was to be the hottest day of the year. The Marines shed their blouses and attacked with nude torsos. Water ran short. There were many casualties. Only after the fourth charge across this field, which remains a wheatfield to this day, did they succeed in gaining a toehold in the woods. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Floyd Gibbons (who lost an eye at Belleau) wrote: "The oats and wheat in the open field were waving and snapping off—not from the wind but from rifle and machinegun fire of German veterans in their well-concealed positions. The sergeant (GySgt Dan Daly who had received a Medal of Honor during the Boxer Rebellion in China and a second during battle against Cacos guerrillas in Haiti) swung his bayoneted rifle over his head with a forward sweep. He yelled at his men, "Come on, you sons-of-bitches. Do you want to live forever?" A German report after the battle read:

> The 3d American Division must be considered a very good one, and may perhaps even be reckoned as storm troops. The different attacks on Belleau were carried out with bravery and dash. The morale effect of our gunfire cannot seriously impede the advance of the American riflemen.

"I am up front and entering Belleau Wood with the U.S. Marines . . ." reporter Gibbons wrote on the evening of 6 June. When his story appeared in the United States, it ignited an explosion of publicity about Marines which did much to build their reputation. Reports from the battlefield show that virtually no man who entered the woods was without some wound. The casualties on that day were incredible. There were some 1,600 that day, close to 20 percent of the brigade's strength.

S.L.A. Marshall, the famous military historian wrote: "Here at Belleau Wood, the German commander was to risk all 'in a local dogfight.' And he had picked on the wrong people."

The battle would go on for another 20 days. On 26 June 1918, the woods had been emptied of Germans. Maj Maurice Shearer, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines sent his famous message: "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely . . ."

The French were relieved that the German advance had been stopped. To honor the Marines they officially renamed the woods "Bois de la Brigade de Marine," a name that sticks to this day.

The casualties had been major. During the 20 days of battle the 4th Brigade lost 1,062 dead and 3,615 wounded, about 58 percent of brigade strength. It's a small figure measured against the millions lost in the battles at Verdun and the Argonne. But it was an enormous figure for the Corps, which at the time numbered just 75,000 men.

Emile Richard is an old man. He raises some cattle, a few chickens, some pigs. He lives alone on top of a small hill near Belleau with his three dogs, his lovingly polished hunting rifles, his memories. He was six years old when the Marines occupied his father's farm on 5 June 1918. The farm still stands, part of it never rebuilt after German artillery demolished it. He remembers the sounds of battle, the wounded, the dead. He remembers a young Marine lieutenant, Victor Blesadale, drawing a map on his kitchen table, setting up machinegun positions for the attack on Belleau. You still can see the shallow pits around Emile Richard's

Hunting lodge in Belleau Wood.

Lt Blaudale's map of machine-gun locations remains today in the home of Emile Richard.

farm. The map is still there. It was left behind and Emile Richard now proudly displays it to visitors. It's his proudest possession. Not much happened in his life. There was the battle of Belleau and a few years ago the young lieutenant who became a general returned to visit him (*MCG*, Nov81). Today in his home is an old crucifix. Jesus lost one hand and his right arm in this long ago battle.

One sultry spring evening as we sat down over a couple of beers at Paris Marine House in the U.S. Embassy, the Marines talked about their frequent visits to Belleau. They go there for Memorial Day parades, spend weekends with the Boy Scouts there, and one Marine got married in the village church. Some just drive out, to be alone and enjoy the woods. "I just get lost, spellbound, when I go there," said one Marine. "I think about what it would be like if I fought there. In boot camp you have classes all the time about the history of the Corps. They tell you about Belleau Wood and they tell you about the fighting there and you take pride in that and all of the tradition.

"But when I finally got to Belleau—it was different. A part of my history is there since I am a Marine and Marines fought and died there. This is a great feeling. I get all rattled up about it. I just lose it, I actually just lose it when I get there. I walk through the fields into the woods and out to the perimeter where the Germans had their machine-gun nests. It's part of my history. I enjoy it. Like most Marines, when we talk about the Corps we bitch about it. . . . But deep down you've got your pride."

Some years ago several young lieutenants visited Belleau while on liberty. They wore their Marine uniforms. "They were quite well behaved," recalls James Neill, who for some 12 years maintained the Belleau cemetery. "They walked around and looked at things. They came to the wheatfield where so many Marines died that one day. The wheat was close to being ready for harvest. Those lieutenants lost all their composure. One started, the others followed. In full uniform they charged across the field, yellin' and screaming, fallin' down in the dirt, crawling as if under fire, scrambling up again, charging the silent woods. It was quite a scene. The farmer, whose field they demolished was rather upset . . . the next day. But when he heard that Marines did it, he actually was pleased 'strange people, those Marines, *those people of Belleau*.'"

Every May the village of Belleau celebrates American Memorial Day. Marines come from Paris and parade up and down the village. There is a little ceremony, some speeches, music and normally a detachment of French Marines. When it's all over, they assemble in the courtyard of the old castle of Belleau (destroyed in the First World War) and drink champagne. "They treat you like kings out there, if you are a Marine," said a Marine at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. All the village turns up for the party. Cookies are served and much champagne. Normally they run out of glasses. Marines and villagers share the same glass, toasting a battle of long ago.

Few tourists find their way to Belleau. That's all right with the people of Belleau and the Marines. "It's our little secret," says an old woman sweeping a courtyard.

There are many traces of the battle. There is the small village church, rebuilt by Americans after the war. It has stained glass windows. One shows a Marine along with a French Poilu. There is a small plaque. "For the children of Belleau who died 1914-1918" it says. An old French school teacher recalls the bad dreams the kids had after the war.

There is a plain grave in the village cemetery. A man called Ernest Stricker is buried here. The villagers say he is a former Marine. He came back to Belleau after the First World War and saw all the graves of his friends. One night he went out and committed suicide. "He wanted to be with them,"

says an old man in Belleau. The people of Belleau got together, bought a plot and buried him. His grave is being maintained to this day. "He had no family," says the old man.

The military cemetery at the edge of the woods is a pleasant, serene place. It is colorful, with large massifs of forsythia, laurel, boxwood, Japanese plum, deutzia, mock orange, Oregon grape, and beds of polyanthus. There are 2,288 Americans buried here, about half of them Marines. There are also the graves of 249 unknowns. During World War II the German Army left the two American flags flying, even after the U.S. entered the war. An honor guard was posted by the Germans, paying their respects to the heroism of the Marines.

The German cemetery is some 350 yards away. Both cemeteries border on the wheatfield that proved fatal for so many. The dates on the headstones are the same: June 6, 1918 . . . June 8, 1918 . . . June 26, 1918. On the graves in both cemeteries are many flowers.

In the woods proper, close to the sign with the offical name "Bois de la Brigade de Marine" is a black granite steel monument bearing a life-size bronze bas-relief of a Marine, nude torso, attacking with rifle and bayonet. (See *MCG*, Oct83, p.20)

There is an abundance of old artillery pieces, heavy guns and light mortars. On some you still see the bullet holes. Others have been spiked by the Marines, their barrels split wide open, like the gaping mouth of a shark. Those guns were drawn by horses and oxen. Many of those animals died in the battle. "They had gas masks for the horses," tells a Frenchman, "but not for the oxen."

Marines earned their nickname, "Devil Dogs," at Belleau. When German troops first occupied Belleau in the beginning of the war, they found the courtyard of the old castle guarded by ferocious bull mastiffs. The Germans called these "Hounds of Belleau" "Devil Dogs," and later referred to the Marines by this same name.

The Hounds of Belleau had lived for centuries in the old castle, guarding the property, occasionally going out on a hunt. They were massive dogs, weighing some 180 to 200 pounds and unusually mild mannered, unless attacked. Today, in the ruins of the old castle, a life-size bronze head of a bull mastiff spews ice-cold, crystal clear water. Marines, after the battle of Belleau, are said to have quenched their thirst at this fountain.

After the battle, France awarded the 5th and 6th Marines the *Croix de Guerre*. To this day these regiments wear the green and red *fourragere* in recognition of their Croix de Guerre awards. Franklin D. Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I, was responsible for another legacy of Belleau Wood. Inspecting the 4th Brigade in August 1918, the future President directed that enlisted Marines be allowed to wear the Corps' emblem on their collars, as officers did. The term "foxhole" also originated at Belleau, as a name for the shallow rifle pits dug there by Marines. Traces of these pits can be found to this day, and the term foxhole is used in official Marine Corps documents.

There are more traces of Belleau in today's Corps. Though not quite as obvious, they may be more important. Rifle squads and fire teams, the smallest organized units in combat, remain to this day the key to Marine Corps infantry tactics. Battle-tested in three wars, occasionally modified, rifle squads and fire teams were first used at Belleau. On memorable 6 June 1918, the Marines did at first what they had been taught. They attacked in a

Wheatfield at Belleau today. Photo was taken at same time attack got underway.

close formation, running up against heavy German machinegun fire. It did not work. The Marines tried it three times and casualties mounted. Jury-rigging what would become future Marine Corps doctrine, they split up into small teams. While one team charged, another would cover it with rifle and machinegun fire. The Germans, unaccustomed to such novel tactics failed to respond in time and by nightime the Marines had secured a toehold in the woods. "The Marines went back to Indian warfare," a Marine officer who studied the battle told us. "They did not play by the rules of the First World War. And those rules were: when you meet resistance, you dig trenches. The Marines did not dig trenches. They used trees and rocks for cover, attacked in small groups, concentrated leadership on the individual Marine. It worked."

It's hard to imagine today's Corps without this battle. In a sense, the Corps proved itself to be a viable land fighting force. The 4th Brigade was the largest Marine force ever fielded. Up to then, Marines had been fighting only in company-size or smaller units, often against poorly trained and equipped enemies. For the first time, Marines fought against a professional army that had been victorious over crack English and French troops. Up to that time many officers in the other Services, especially in the U.S. Army, had doubted that those "sea soldiers" could fight a regular land battle. The Marines proved they could. MajGen John A. Lejeune, who was to become Marine Commandant, was even appointed to command the 2d Division during the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

Basic training at Parris Island made its first lasting mark on the Corps. Parris Island had only been used a few months for basic training when the war started. Recalls Ben Finney, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel: "During the day we trained; at night we built the roads." Parris Island was quite tough in those days. The Marine Corps allowed just six weeks of basic training at Parris Island and two or three weeks of combat training at Quantico before shipping to France. But the training, tough at it was, suffered, although much shorter than the more relaxed six months of training the Army gave its recruits. "France was a sinecure after Parris Island," says Finney, "we didn't care that we were going to war. All we cared about was getting away from Parris Island."

The memory of the battle lingers in the minds of old men of Belleau who sit down in the early evening, drinking the light beer of the region, or the bittersweet anisette. Our Red Man chewing tobacco is popular. The 2d Division had an Indian head as its logo—so does this particular brand of chewing tobacco.

The hospitality is overwhelming. Elsewhere in France outsiders are regarded with suspicion, or ignored. Here the people greet you and take time to talk to you. As the mayor says: "A little bit of their own place." Agrees a Marine in Paris: "It's like coming home at times."

But you have to walk through the woods. Traces of the battle are everywhere. There are 11 tons of metal in every acre. Nobody can build there. Unexploded shells, some containing high explosives, others mustard gas, contaminate the ground. Every once in a while the soil turns up a shell. A cow will step on it and die. Every spring more metal surfaces. Old helmets, old canteens. We walk around an old artillery position and find many wood spikes. We find old Marine Corps bread boxes, a barrel of an '03 rifle; the rest has disappeared. A Marine found a cup decorated with the picture of Kaiser Wilhelm II celebrating the victory. Once in a while human bones are found. A skull, wearing a German helmet, was found in a treetop. Five complete Marine Corps first-aid kits were found in a tree, placed there in the heat of battle, then forgotten.

But it is the trees that tell the story. Those trees that saw the battle as young, fresh saplings still carry the scars. Some have been so mutilated by shrapnel that one wonders how they survived; which trees were used as cover by Marines, which by Germans. Bark hides rusty shrapnel once destined for a man but caught by a tree. Occasionally the grounds keeper will cut down one of these survivors. Not too long ago live ordnance was found inside one tree. The tree grew old carrying in it lethal bits of metal. When the last survivor of the battle is dead, the remaining trees will still display their pathetic scars. USMC

Quotes to Ponder:

Tradition

"The Corps has scores of traditions, and one is that when the Marines' Hymn is played, no matter what happens, you stand at attention until it's over. It is a body salute to the good men and true who came before . . ."

Lynn Ashby